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Goethe's "Welt" poet in Bengal: The Influence of World Literature on Jibanananda Das and other Bengali poets of the 1930s-40s

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Abstract
This study aims to establish a link between the concept of "Weltliteratur" or World Literature, in terms of the free movement of literary themes and ideas between nations in original form or translation, and the Bengali poets of the thirties and forties who actively translated French and German poets. It identifies Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) concept of World Literature as a vehicle for the Kallol Jug poets. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe introduced the concept of "Weltliteratur" in a few of his essays in the first half of the nineteenth century to describe the international circulation and reception of literary works in Europe, including works of non-Western origin. My emphasis will be on Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) arguably the most celebrated poet in Bengali literature who was well versed in the contemporary Western Canons of Poetry. Jibanananda's defamiliarization of the rural Bengal Landscape, his use of exotic foreign images owe a debt to contemporary European poets. Interestingly, Jibanananda had reviewed an English translation of German author Thomas Mann's novel "Dr Faustus' for a Bengali magazine "Chaturanga". In the Bengali review he states that despite prevalent misconceptions (some critics considering the novel to be superior to the original Faust epic by Goethe) Goethe's Faust was the first text to capture the hope, despair and crisis in the modern world and articulate it in such a manner that "true" literature of the age was created in its new light. In Jibanananda's estimation, Thomas Mann deserves credit for treating the Faust legend in a unique and creative way.

Keywords- Landscape, Romantic, Proclamation, Indianness

> "Left to itself, all Literature will lose its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interests and contributions of a foreign one"-Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Introduction

The influence of English Romantic poets on the works of Michael Madhusudhan Dutt and Rabindranath has been discussed at some length by scholars and critics. It is perhaps a quirk of fate that the search for a new poetic voice to articulate the war-torn years of unemployment, freedom struggle and political unrest made the Kallol group of poets turn to European Literature again. The Kallol group consisted of influential Bengali poets of the 1930s-40s Buddhadeb Basu, Premendra

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Mitra, Bishnu Dey and Jibanananda Das. The important "agenda" of these poets was to "free" the contemporary poetry from "Rabindrik' traditions and search for new and unique poetic devices.

Goethe had made a prophetic proclamation as early as the 1820s regarding a situation which comes true for Bengali Poetry in the 1930s-40s- 'Left to itself all Literature will lose vitality if it is not refreshed by the interests and contributions of a foreign one." The introduction of offshoots of Modernism-Symbolism, Surrealism and Impressionism infused a new life into Traditional Bengali Poetry of the thirties. Jibanananda Das, Bishnu Dey, Buddhadev Basu, Sudhindranath Dutt were all 'global citizens' and contemporary political events such as the World Wars, financial downturn, unemployment, non-cooperation- movements shaped their sensibilities. In terms of description of Nature and use of imagery, these poets of the thirties did not confine themselves to only Bengal or even India. It is often argued that some of Jibanananda's images - "eyes like a bird's nest ", "phosphorus of the eyes" and the s "silence like the neck of the camel" do not convey great meaning to Bengali readers as they are "unknown". In terms of "effect," such images do not hinder the readers when the poet intends to create a historical sense or the sense of the exotic. Yet these are foreign images, as is Jibanananda's preoccupation with the season of Autumn- a theme frequent in the poetry of John Keats and W.B Yeats. The season seldom occupies a place of prominence in Bengali poetry - Spring and Summer being the seasons of preference.

"The Imagery of the "West" brings a freshness to Jibanananda's poetry that "the sculpture of Sravasti" cannot produce. Is Modern Bengali poetry a blind imitation of the Western Canons of Modern Poetry? Are historical events that shaped the Modern consciousness and literature similar in nature to the Indian Narrative?" Such questions were raised by Rabindranath in Sahitya Dharma and also Atulchandra Gupta. The rapid advancement in global communication necessitated the birth of the' global citizen' as is perceived from Rabindranath's reaction to the Soviet bombings of Finland. But, in the larger context, questions about the exchange of thoughts and ideas in World Literature between Nations endangering creativity and posing a challenge to Nationalism assume relevance. In this context, deliberations of Goethe on the nature of world literature, the exchange of thoughts and ideas across international boundaries, assume importance.

1.1 The Beginnings of a "Shared Experience": Goethe and Kalidasa's "Shakuntala"

The impact of Kalidasa's epic drama "Shakuntala", originally composed in Sanskrit, on German scholars and authors was significant. It is perhaps one of the earliest examples of an Indian text travelling across borders into Germany. Goethe was fascinated by Sir William Jones's translation of Kalidasa's "Shakuntala" - "Recalling the enthusiasm with which we Germans welcomed this translation of Shakuntala we can attribute the pleasure it gave us to the prose in which it came to us".

Friedrich Rueckert translated the drama into German again in 1855—this time direct from the Sanskrit—but his version was only published in 1867, after his death. Georg Forster, the Mainz Jacobin, produced his German prose translation of Jones' English version of "Shakuntala". He sent a copy to Goethe who composed his praise in two couplets: If in one word of blooms of early and fruits of riper years, Of excitement and enchantment, I should tell, Of fulfilment and content, of Heaven and Earth; Then will l but say "Shakuntala' and have said all, German poet Heinrich Heine's Chapter entitled "Thoughts and Ideas" makes an interesting observation regarding Goethe's epic "Faust" He notes that Goethe made use of "Shakuntala" at the beginning of "Faust" and mentions a probability that Goethe conceived the idea of the "Vorspiel auf dem Theater" /Prelude on the Theater in 'Faust' from the prologue to "Shakuntala" In " Shakuntala" an actor appears first on the stage and offers a prayer to Siva. Then the stage director appears and calls the principal actress onstage. He informs her

that Kalidisa's drama “Shakuntala” is about to be performed before a distinguished audience so that the actors must perform to the best of their abilities.

Goethe was thus one of the pioneers of the concept of a ‘shared world literature’. The term "Weltliteratur" is used sparingly but there are numerous other instances where he discusses the nature of World Literature. In his journal “Propyläen”, Goethe writes:

> It is to be hoped that people will soon be convinced that there is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science. Both belong, like all good things, to the whole world, and can be fostered only by untrammelled intercourse among all contemporaries, continually bearing in mind what we have inherited from the past" (quoted in Fritz Strich. Goethe and World Literature. 1825 Jan. 10)

In a letter to his friend Adolph Friedrich Carl Streckfuss, Goethe writes: "I am convinced that a "World literature" is in process of formation, that the nations are all in favour of it and for this reason make friendly overtures. The German can and should be most active in this respect; he has a part to play in this great mutual approach" (quoted in Strich 1949: 349). (1827 Jan. 31)

In a letter to Count Stolberg, Goethe writes: "Poetry is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality" (Suhrkamp, 1986. 227). (1827 July 15)

In a letter to Sulpiz Boisserée, Goethe writes: "What I call world literature develops in the first place when the differences that prevail within one nation are resolved through the understanding and judgment of the rest" (quoted in Strich 1949: 349). 9 (1828 Jan. 1)

In a famous statement in January 1827, Goethe predicted to poet Johann Peter Eckermann that in future world literature would supplant all national Literature as the major mode of literary creativity:

> I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men I like to look about me in foreign nations and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.

The simple title of David Damrosch’s book, “What is World Literature*”* (2003) might lead the reader to respond that, world literature is simply comprised of writing from around the world. Damrosch offers a much more in-depth and interesting glimpse of what he believes this literature to be. He helps the reader to understand that a piece of literature transforms when it stops being a national work and becomes an international work. Literature is transformed, he says, once it crosses the border from one country into another.

In his introduction, he uses Goethe’s coined German phrase Weltliteratur and is concerned about how single works of literature retain or change their meaning when they travel through translation into a new culture and background. He identifies circulation, production and translation and observes that all world literature is elliptical refraction of national literature. The process of a literary text travelling to another country involves different levels of meaning which are in a state of constant change transporting ideas and concepts. His also points out that “world literature is writing that gains in translation.” He explains that several different types of literature can either maintain or lose meaning when they become a translated work. Meanwhile, other literary works such as poems are difficult to translate because they are so tied to the original language that they can lose meaning in their translation and read poorly in the other language. This, he decides, is national literature.

The concept of a “shared world literature’ continues to generate debate, with critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak arguing that the study of world literature in translation smooths out both the linguistic richness of the original and the political force a work can have in its original context. Other

scholars, on the contrary, emphasize that world literature can and should be studied with close attention to original languages and contexts,

1.2 "A Meeting of Minds": A close Affinity of Modern Bengali poets with Western Canons of Poetry

The reflection of "foreign" influences on Bengali poetry as a tradition cannot be doubted. The approach has changed dramatically over the last century -while the norm was earlier to "sell' and exotic landscape, myth and folklore to the West- the poets of the 30s imbibed the West in their unique way in their poetry

An important aspect of the international connection is the personal identification of each major Bengali poet of the 1930s-40s with the West. The" woman" in Sudhindranath Dutta's poetry is a foreigner – with blue eyes and white fingers. References to France and China also abound in his poems. Even Jibanananda for whom the favoured landscape was 'Bengal the Beautiful' had to compose poems on contemporary global political issues in his later days like Dance of the Twilight. Bishnu Dey liberally used quotations from Western poets. It is this global consciousness that pervaded Bengali poetry in the thirties. Buddhadev Basu's proximity to Rimbaud and Baudelaire, Jibanananda's to Keats and Yeats, Sudhindranath's fascination with Mallarme and Valery and the influence of T.S Eliot and Pound on Bishnu Dey can be perceived. This was perhaps natural as they were students of English Literature and wanted to move away from tradition. The distinguishing factor being that Jibanananda had seen contemporary time in the context of a universal backdrop of time. Jibanananda observes:

After a long period of Rabindranath's influence, this new group of poets is the gift of Time". It has to be remembered that the poet, in these times had to take into account several changes made to the form and content of Romantic Lyric Poetry – made by movements such as Symbolism, Impressionism, Surrealism and Imagism. These movements in world literature are shaping the responses of the modern Bengali reader.

The Kallol poets were greatly influenced by the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The Kallol magazine regularly published Premendra Mitra, Ajit Dutta, Annada Sankar Ray, Manish Shatak, Bishnu Dey, and of course Jibanananda Das. The Kallol magazine articulated a need to identify with contemporary Western Literacy Movements – hence it published translations of Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell and Sigmund Freud. The poets who contributed were not only getting acquainted with British and French authors but Spanish, Italian, German and Polish authors as well.
The magazine was a "melting pot" of young poets who according to Achitya Sengupta articulated the maladies of contemporary society. Popular themes were Freud's works and the dialectical materialism of Marx along with contemporary movements like the Khilafat Movement (1919-21).The "Unreal City" of T. S. Eliot was becoming contemporary to Bengali literature as well, with its barren conventions and futile exercises.

Jibanananda was of opinion that the modern Bengali poet by his efforts to create a new balance between the ancient traditions and the best of Western contemporary poetry has succeeded in creating a future that does not focus on Vaishnava Padavalis, Mangal Kavyas, Madhusudhan or Rabindranath but the independent, free expression. He maintained that while it is important to connect with Bengali poetic conventions, there should be a close association bet French and English Poetry as well.

The major influence on the poets of the Kallol Period was the Symbolist and Surrealist Movements in European literature. The major poets of the Symbolist movement, under the influence of Charles Baudelaire, were Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry and Arthur Rimbaud.

Symobolism in poetry has been defined by Bowra as "Symbolism, then, was in origin a mystical kind of poetry – whose technique depended on its metaphysics and whose popularity was due to the element of music in his art".

But the native reader will appreciate the poem independent of such influences. The poem "The City" by Jibanananda bears a resemblance with T.S Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men':

O heart, you have seen a lot of big cities
The brick and mortar of those cities,
Words, work, hope and disappointment dreadful removed eyes
Have turned to eyes in my dejected heard

The poem echoes "The Hollow Men":

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdom

In his treatise" KobitarKotha"/ About Poetry Jibanananda had hinted at not being overly enthused by Eliot yet the pain of existence, the futility of life is common to both poets. Both use astronomy in some poems - in "The Wasteland' Eliot uses cosmology to hint at predestination. Libra, Scorpio, Pisces. Similar Zodiac signs Brischik, Karkat, Tula, Meen manifest themselves in Jibanananda's poem "The Dance of Twilight".

Incidentally, we find an interest manifested by Jibanananda in "Bengal the Beautiful" in the sky and the stars - but later they achieve a symbolic significance which we may attribute to Eliot. Jibanananda's world of "perilous wonder' in a reportage of suicide in the poem "One Day Eight Years Ago" and owls, vultures create a surreal background it is a process of imbibing a "foreign element" into his poetry which is essentially 'modern".

The poem "Bonolata Sen" is believed to be inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's "To Helen'. But while Poe's poem is apostrophic, Jibanananda's an emotional narrative lyric. The theme of "Bonolata Sen" involves a dramatic discovery and the associated emotions involved with this sudden discovery. In 'To Helen" there is no sense of discovery, rather a controlled response to the historic domain of Helen. There are, however, similar echoes in "Bonolata Sen" "hair like the darkness and her face like the sculpture of Sravasti" in terms of imagery.

Both poems, in the second stanza, mention a homecoming after a long and weary journey. But in that last stanza of "To Helen", the image of a waiting-woman is similar to Jibanananda's poem *Shyamali* - Jibanananda speaks of a lady with a "*Monika Alo*"/ light in her hand, and Poe writes "How statue-like I see thee stand / The agate lamp within thy hand". The similarity in the use of words and imagery is striking. In "To Helen':

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicéan barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.
On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,

And the grandeur that was Rome.

In Jibanananda's poem *Shayamali* :

Shyamali, your face is like the strength of old
When young men boarded ships
to far-off countries for Gold...

From the publication of Grey Manuscripts to the Darkness of The Seven Stars the influence of W. B. Yeats is evident - Yeats towards the beginning of his literary career in "The Rose" (1893) had mentioned his motto - "in dreams begin responsibilities". Jibanananda has spoken of the same reliance on dreams towards the end of "Grey Manuscripts". The influence of Yeats can be felt in the images of many poems of Jibanananda - the wild ducks, the cry of the eye, (a lady with soft eyes like funeral tapers). The change in the theme and structure of poems in "the Darkness of the Seven Stars" from the mysterious dream-like utterances are similar to Yeats' choice in later poems, for sharper language and controlled prose-like quality.

The dream-like quality of Irish folklore and myth – "The Rose", "The Wild Swans At Coole" is replaced by the sharp bitter realism of "The Winding Stair" in the poems of Yeats. In similar vein "I Shall Return to This Bengal" and" I have seen the Face of Bengal" have little in common with subsequent poems 'Night' and 'Darkness' by Jibanananda in terms of theme and structure.

Conclusion

In A Certain Sense, Dr Sisir Kumar Das, while analyzing Jibanananda's *Kalpana Monisha* /Power of imagination identifies him as "regional"……yet free from the arrogance of patriotism." Decades earlier in "Kobitar Kotha', Jibanananda had observed that Bengali (as well as Indian) poetry can only advance if it can imbibe English and French poetry. In recent times there has been a propensity to avoid western literature and to focus on African and Latin American literature. This can be translated as a growing interest in post-colonial centuries. There has also been some interest in translation from one regional language to another. This can well be termed as an inter-regional era in Indian literature. In the centenary edition of Jibananada, "SatabarsheJibanananda" Marathi poet Dilip Chitre observes that his poetry has been greatly facilitated by the close readings of Jibanananda's poem" Grass'. It has to be noted that due to various reasons Modern Bengali poets continue to be practically untraceable beyond India and Bangladesh. Lack of competent translators, language barriers as well as the machinations of the world of publishers have rather made Bengali poets after Rabindranath vehicles of "one-way traffic". Goethe's vision of the exchange of thoughts and ideas has not occurred. There are consolations though-the huge all-pervasive power of social media can play an important role in the future journey of Bengali Poetry on a global scale. Interestingly, two of the finest studies on Jibanananda Das's poetry in any language have been published in English by Dr Clinton. B.Seely, an American Professor, and a Jibanananda "fan'. The studies include a Ph. D Thesis entitled "Doe in Heat": A Critical Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) With Relevant Literary History From The Mid-1920'S to the Mid-1950'S and a book 'A Poet Apart.'

These appraisals not only provide true meaning for Goethe's vision of a borderless world of literature free of geographical, cultural and linguistic barriers but are guiding spirits for humble enthusiasts of poetry such as I.

Endnotes

1. In his journal Kunst und Altertum (Art and Antiquity), Goethe writes: "Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one.

What naturalist does not take pleasure in the wonderful things that he sees produced by reflection in a mirror? "

2. Goethe From "Faust I (Vorspiel auf demTheater)"]"Faust I" is a collection of Goethe's works and when combined with "Faust II," the two span 60 years of the poet's artistic writings. "Vorspiel auf dem Theater" **(***Prelude on the Theater***)** is one poem examining the conflicts of drama and theatre.
3. Kallol Jug- The Kallol circle was an important group of Bengali poets in the 1930s notably Buddhadeb Basu, Premendra Mitra Sudhindranath Dutta, AmiyoChakroborty and. Jibanananda Das wrote against established literary conventions and ushered European Modernism into Bengal freely translating the works of Italian French and German writers.
4. Abhijnanashakuntalam , also known as Shakuntala,is a Sanskrit play by the ancient Indian poet Kalidasa, dramatizing the story of Shakuntala told in the epic Mahabharata and regarded as the finest of Kalidasa's works. Its exact date is uncertain, but Kalidasa is often placed in the 4th century CE
5. Kalidasa- 4th–5th century CE) was a Classical Sanskrit author who is often considered ancient India's greatest playwright and dramatist. His plays and poetry are primarily based on the Vedas, the Ramayana the Mahabharata and the Puranas. His surviving works consist of three plays, two epic poems and two shorter poems. Much about his life is unknown except what can be inferred from his poetry and plays. His works cannot be dated with precision, but they were most likely authored before the 5th century CE.

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